

The Baltics

Lithuanian Sees Completely Different Future for Communism

By BILL KELLER

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VILNIUS, U.S.S.R., Jan. 31 — In Lithuania, they say that Algirdas Brazauskas has seen the future of Soviet Communism, and it looks — well, frankly, not very Communist.

Under Mr. Brazauskas' direction, the Communist Party of this Baltic republic has declared its independence from the mother party in Moscow, accepted the competition of rival political parties, purged much of its old guard and adopted a platform that barely pays homage to Marx and Lenin.

For party leaders in Moscow now contemplating the cruel world of political pluralism, the Lithuanian experience suggests that the Communist Party can recover a measure of its dwindling authority, but only by remaking itself beyond recognition and facing up to the real possibility of life in the minority.

Mr. Brazauskas, a 57-year-old with the heft and agility of a linebacker, contends that this humbling transformation is worth it, considering the alternatives offered by Romania and Soviet Azerbaijan, where rigid resistance gave way to bloody confrontation.

Outscores the Independents

"The party can't live for itself, like it was in Romania, where the party was something untouchable, beyond criticism, always right, which never made a mistake," he said in an interview. "Either the party has to radically change itself to get closer to the people, or it must liquidate itself."

The payoff of Mr. Brazauskas' approach is that he is perhaps the only senior Communist Party official in Europe who consistently wins popularity polls, outscoring every prominent independent political figure in the republic.

And some of the luster is rubbing off on his party. The most startling evidence was a public opinion poll conducted here in early January, shortly after the Communist Party of Lithuania broke formally with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and approved a program embracing Lithuanian independence, political pluralism and free markets.

The survey by researchers at the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences found that the Communist Party had a 73 percent positive rating among the general public, edging out the independent political movement called Sajudis.

'Probably Unique in the World'

"I think this is probably unique in the world," said Mr. Brazauskas, whose party had a mortifying 16 percent approval in an identical poll taken in November.

Despite this sudden spike in popularity, however, party officials concede there is a good chance that after the elections for a Lithuanian Parliament scheduled for Feb. 24 they will become junior partners in a coalition government dominated by newly legalized opposition parties and independents.

Mr. Brazauskas says he is prepared



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Lithuania's Communist Party is trying to regain public support.

to live with defeat, although he is campaigning fiercely in election districts to prevent it.

"I think there will be fewer Communists" in the new parliament, he concedes. "But they will be better Communists."

Yearning for Independence

When Mr. Brazauskas was named in 1988 to head the Lithuanian Party, he was in a position not unlike that of President Mikhail S. Gorbachev today. He was perceived as a cautious reformer, whose party was rapidly losing influence to the political insurgents allied under the Sajudis banner.

As the Lithuanians were swept by a yearning for independence — a status lost when the three Baltic states were forcibly annexed in 1940 — Mr. Brazauskas began distancing himself from the Kremlin.

In December, the Lithuanian party openly defied an angry Kremlin and

'Either the party has to radically change or it must liquidate itself.'

proclaimed itself autonomous, adopting a program that is almost indistinguishable from the platform of the newly legalized Lithuanian Democratic Party.

'They're Already History'

Unlike the Soviet Communist Party, the Lithuanian offshoot welcomes religious believers as members. It endorses free markets, including private ownership of industry and farmland. It eschews "democratic centralism," the centralized discipline that requires members to support the line dictated from above.

"We don't make any claims to the role of teacher," Mr. Brazauskas said, when asked if he imagines the beleaguered Soviet party following Lithuania's example. "But the experience of certain other republics has already shown what happens when the leadership insists on its firm course for no clear reason, just for the sake of some principle."

"And now we don't see them any more, they're already history."

The Lithuanian party advocates complete political independence for Lithuania, although Mr. Brazauskas calls for a careful transition period and for maintaining loose ties with Moscow, roughly analogous to the ties in the European Economic Community.

"It will be a union or a commonwealth of states built on a voluntary basis and on mutual benefit," he said, taking a position that goes beyond what Mr. Gorbachev has explicitly advocated.

To the astonishment of many Lithuanians, four Sajudis leaders were inducted into the party's 19-member leadership, where they form an uninhibited lobby for secession.

A Quick Break Urged

"Brazauskas sincerely agonizes over this issue," said Romualdas Ozolas, one of the Sajudis Communists. "He talks about independence, but as an economist it is very difficult for him to imagine that at a certain point, independence will demand the breaking of relations with Moscow."

Mr. Ozolas argues that Lithuania should make the break quickly and accept a period of chaos.

No surprisingly, Mr. Brazauskas is a pariah among Communist hard-liners here and in Moscow. Some 35,000 of Lithuania's 200,000 party members have defected to form a loyalist rump party, and thousands more have simply quit.

But his personal standing is so strong that the Communist Party is now pressing for direct elections of the republic's President, rather than selection by the parliament itself. Sajudis leaders say that while they may control a majority in the Parliament, Mr. Brazauskas would probably be unbeatable in a direct election.

May Leave Party Leadership

If Mr. Brazauskas wins the presidency in the new parliament, aides say he will almost certainly step down as party leader to concentrate on the job. Mr. Brazauskas recommends that Mr. Gorbachev do the same on the federal level, as a way of insulating the President somewhat from partisan political pressures.

For all the evidence of surging prestige, the new party is viewed with suspicion by many Lithuanians, who say its political machine is still inhabited with holdovers who used to bow to Moscow.

"They are a long way from purging all of the guilty ones," said Kazimieras



The New York Times/Bill Keller
Algirdas Brazauskas, the Communist party leader in Lithuania, in his office in Vilnius. His party has declared its independence from the Communist Party in Moscow and initiated a multi-party system.

Motieka, a lawyer who quit the Lithuanian party a year ago and has no intention of rejoining now.

Leaders of newly registered rival parties also complain that the Communists have been slow to forfeit such vital election advantages as their dominance of local television.

Mr. Ozolas, the Sajudis interloper in the party leadership, sees the remodeled Communist Party as a handy vehicle until Lithuania is free.

"This is a party designed for relations with Moscow," he said. "Communism is a hieroglyph that Moscow can read; it still can't read any other political hieroglyphs."

"So, for negotiations on the path to

wards our secession, we have to have a Communist Party. And that's where I am — not for any other reasons. And when the issue of independence is resolved, I'll just leave this party."

A Leader Ousted in Siberia

MOSCOW, Feb. 6 (AP) — The Communist Party leader in the Siberian city of Sverdlovsk has resigned in a growing wave of discontent over regional and local party practices, the newspaper Trud reported today. The resignation of the official, Leonid F. Zobkin, was announced on Monday at a regional meeting of party activists, the newspaper said. He was accused of not acting in the spirit of glasnost.